The Work of The Red Cross

By Clara Barton

"That Little Meeting at Geneva"—Red Cross Work in Foreign Countries—No Red Cross in Our Civil War—Flag a Compliment to Switzerland—No Religious Preferences Indicated—Not Connected with "Red Cross" Secret Societies—Japan an Advanced Red Cross Nation—How Interest in the Work Was Stimulated in America—Relief Rendered at Times of National Calamity—In Wartime.

(The name of Clara Barton is known throughout the world through her efforts to alleviate the horrors of war. She was president of the American National Red Cross from its organization in 1881 to 1904. During the American civil war she did relief work on the battlefields. During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and 1871 she was associated with the International Red Cross. She has represented the United States in many international conferences. During the Russian famine of 1892 and the Armenian massacres of 1896 she distributed relief. At the time of the Spanish-American war she carried relief to Cuba.)

It is probable that there are few terms in general use among us, or few subjects so frequently referred to of which so little is correctly known as the so-called Red Cross.

The causes for this obscurity are many. Among the great movements of civilization the Red Cross is comparatively new. It is of foreign birth, consequently its literature is in foreign languages and in many languages, while we are notably a one-language people. The subject with which it was born to deal—namely, human warfare, was, until the Spanish-American war, experimentally unknown to our present generation, and the desire for and the certainty of a perpetual peace for the future had begotten an indifference, not to say repulsion, in the minds of the public, which turned it instinctively — often impatiently — away from all topics bearing upon the subject of war.

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The history of the world is largely a history of its wars and through the 4,000 years, until three and a half centuries ago, there is no official record of any movement to lessen the woes of those who fought them. At that date a medical service was attached to armies, and was thought to be sufficient for any emergency that could ever arise. Through all the terrible wars of Napoleon I. this service was never changed, increased or questioned. But when the doors of Scutara opened for Florence Nightingale and her 40 nurses, the flood of light which followed them revealed serious defects. Still so slow is the march of improvement that the war of Lombardy in 1859 showed no amendment.

On June 24 of that same year the armies of Napoleon III., equipped with every facility then known to military medical science, stood face to face with the foe in northern Italy, 300,000 combatants in a line five leagues in length, and fought 15 hours without cessation or rest. The horrors of the field, through the suffering of its wounded from want of care—scarcely one surgeon for 50 men, bleeding, fainting and famishing—were witnessed by a humane Swiss gentleman, Henri Dumant, who stayed his traveling carriage in the vicinity of the battle and worked among the wounded. The memories of the suffering he had witnessed, haunted him, until at length he wrote and published them, and the "Souvenir de Solferino" in a few months had been translated into the leading languages of the world, and lay on the tables and on the hearts of the best of Europe.

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The seed had been well sown, and in 1863 it took root in a conference at Geneva, Switzerland, which sought to find if some way could be devised to lessen the needless suffering of soldiers on the field, which seemed to be largely the result of customary military restrictions. It was proved that no army ever had been found equal to the needs of its wounded in a battle. It was equally decided that this never could be, as no army could move, march and fight, while burdened with sufficient medical material or personnel to meet the needs of its wounded in and after a battle. The remedy suggested struck a blow at one of the strongest, time-honored rules of war—namely, that no civilian be allowed upon a field, especially in time of battle; the proposition of the conference being that societies of civilians be formed in the various countries, whose duty it should be to provide whatever might be lacking in the medical department of an army in the field, either of material or personnel, and whose privilege it should be, to go under proper restrictions, and use them.

The plan further proposed that each country should have one central society, that this society should have the power to form other societies, to provide surgeons and equip them, to establish hospitals, to train nurses; in short, to be a civil arm of war in the name of humanity, if wars must exist—or, rather, while they must exist—for no one saw any immediate way of preventing them. Further, it proposed that these societies should keep themselves prepared to accompany their respective armies, with the same readiness for emergencies as those in the pay of the state, and yet they would be no expense to the state nor to any but themselves. Singularly, of this conference of only 36 persons 18 were official delegates, representing 14 powerful governments. The historian has aptly said that "the eyes of all Europe were turned toward that little meeting at Geneva."

Kindly keep in mind the date—1863, just the middle of our civil war. Three thousand miles away, we knew little of European movements; in war ourselves, we had little time to study them. Our sanitary commission was struggling into active life and Europe knew nothing of it. The Red Cross had not even a name. Please let this answer the mistaken, misleading and constantly recurring question of the "Red Cross in our civil war." There was none.

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That conference of 1863 accomplished prodigies of successful labor within a year. It drew into its compact the concurrence of two-thirds of the important countries of Europe, which proceeded to establish aid or central societies for relief in war; as, for instance, Austria, Spain, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Prussia, six German states, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, Portugal and Denmark. Although thorough advocates, these societies were merely single-handed and national, each ready to act with all humanity and generosity to friend and foe; but there was no bond between them; internationally they had no existence. The established laws of war held its impenetrable mantle over them and internationally there was no link between these civil aid societies and the military of even their own countries. The surgeons whom they would send could still be captured, their wounded could be left on the field to suffer and die, the material could become the spoil of the conqueror; hospitals could be robbed and their inmates either left destitute or dragged off to prison, according to the caprice of the conqueror. International law sanctioned these things.

It was clearly, therefore, international law that must be remedied in this respect. This conference of 1863 bravely called for another to be held in 1864, which should take on the character of a convention, consisting exclusively of delegates from the crowned heads and rulers of the world—the makers of war—armed with treaty powers, regarding the conduct of armies in the field and the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers. This convention was held at Geneva in August, 1864.

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A compound international treaty was entered into, known as the treaty of Geneva, for the aid of the sick and wounded of armies. The first clause of this remarkable document of ten articles strikes the keynote of all that was sought, by declaring neutral all persons disabled on a field, all persons properly authorized to care for them, as surgeons, chaplains, attendants, all materials sent or designed for the use of the wounded in hospitals and the hospitals themselves. Wounded prisoners were to be given up if desired; the sick and wounded were to be taken care of regardless of nationality, friend and foe receiving the same care from all belligerents. A sign was created by which all persons engaged in the relief of the wounded of either army might be known. All material, as food, clothing and vehicles, having this sign, should be sacred from capture. One flag bearing this sign was instituted for all military hospitals and all hospitals flying that flag should be held sacred from attack.

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To return to the national societies. Strengthened by the convention of 1864, and the protection of the treaty, no time was lost by them. In 1866 Austria, Italy and Germany afforded opportunity for trial. The hard field of Sadowa testified as to their need. Italy and Germany were in the treaty; Austria was not.

That made no difference in the treatment of Austria's wounded. Pardubitz fed and dressed the wounds of 600 to 800 a day for two months, regardless of friend or foe.

In 1870 under Napoleon III. France marched to its eastern borders, while Germany watched the Rhine. Both were leading Red Cross nations. The German Red Cross, like its army, was ready. Its central committee received and applied $10,000,000 as an aid to the medical department of the army. The Red Cross of France, like its army, was not ready, and yet its alacrity surprised the world. In one month France raised and equipped 17 movable field hospitals, which were sent to the army and went with it to Sedan. During the siege and commune at Paris a vast number of sick and wounded soldiers had been massed together and the famine of the last days of the siege rendered their condition pitiable beyond description. The Red Cross, by full approval of the Prussian authorities, removed 10,000 of these and brought back 9,000 prisoners from Germany. I speak of these from personal observation and participation.

In July, 1876, Servia and Montenegro entered Turkey. All were in the treaty. The Turkish officials, intelligent and educated, understood the origin of the Red Cross and respected it, but prudently feared to place a cross in the sight of their ignorant, fanatical soldiery, and the Red Crescent was substituted, which remains until to-day. In 1877 Russia came down and crossed the Danube. Plevna tells its terrible tale. The Servian Red Cross, young and poor, established its wonderful hospital at Belgrade and, Roumania nursed 1,042 wounded Turks. Fifteen million dollars in Red Cross relief was spent by Russia alone.

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The Japanese are one of the most advanced Red Cross nations, the emperor being the active head of the central society. Their work for the relief of suffering during the late war with Russia aroused the wonder and admiration of the world.

Of civil wars there has been no end. Italy had its Garibaldian and papal war. Spain had its Carlist war. Russia led its armies to the region of Persia and its Red Cross sent 117 persons after them, who followed the advanced guard, six being wounded and 12 killed.

The Dutch established its Red Cross in the Malay war in 1878. Bolivia and Peru entered the treaty during their civil wars of 1879 to 1881.

In the early Transvaal war the Boers, without being in the treaty, lived up to its highest precepts.

Civil wars are usually considered the most cruel and yet, singularly, the Carlist war in Spain was said to have been exempt from cruelties; doctors and nurses were respected, prisoners were well treated and even the wounded insurgents were set at liberty at Pampeluna. Spain has always regarded its Red Cross and even in the height of the Spanish-American war sent its official testimonial of regard to the president of the Red Cross of America.

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It will be recalled that although officially invited to every conference the United States was too sadly occupied to give attention to anything outside itself, until the close of our civil war. Then it was too worn, tired and glad of the end of war to ever want to hear of it again. Thus it happened that when Dr. Henry W. Bellows, the great apostle of war relief, and president of our sanitary commission, having come in contact with the Red Cross at the Paris exposition in 1868, and perceiving its great utility, undertook to interest the American people and induce the government to unite with the treaty and actually formed a society, failed both with government and people, was compelled to abandon his society and relinquish his efforts. Foreign nations regretted this and continued their efforts to interest America. At length, in 1877, a second effort was made, during the administration of President Hayes, and continued successively through a term of five years. In 1882, during the administration of President Arthur, following out the expressed desires of his lamented predecessor, Garfield, and the advices of his cabinet, the treaty was adopted by our government.

We had no wars, no battlefields to attract their sympathy and help, but we had great disasters constantly occurring, as pitiable oftentimes as a battle, and then it was our custom to call upon the government to give relief through appropriations from the treasury. Here was a legitimate opportunity to apply the first great principles of the Red Cross, namely, "people's help for national need." To this opportunity the perplexed committee turned and on presenting the treaty for acceptance it prayed the ratifying powers at Bern to accept the United States, with the privilege of relieving in great national calamities, other than war, confining its operations to disasters beyond local relief and requiring governmental aid. The committee frankly gave its reasons, admitting that it was an innovation. Still, the request was kindly considered and granted. Thus in 1882 America stood alone among the Red Cross treaty nations with the official privilege of rendering aid in great calamities in civil life.

America has a double responsibility. Its Red Cross is twofold—civil and military; both alike legitimate, both of the same origin, imposing the same duties. A few years ago the war victims of Manila were pouring into San Francisco in thousands, wounded, sick, poor and friendless. The Red Cross of California received every one, nursed, fed and helped them on. This was Red Cross war relief. At the same time the elements had devastated a great seaboard city, literally sweeping it into the ocean, drowned 10,000 of its people and left 20,000 homeless, ruined and desolate. The Red Cross entered there and by request took charge of its relief, working for months among the distressed victims, distributing the charities of the people, braving an atmosphere nearly fatal to health and life, and only left when the survivors could help themselves. This was civil Red Cross relief—the same organization, the same officers, the same society, the same work. Again, when San Francisco had been destroyed by earthquake and fire, the Red Cross helped to bear relief to it.

Misfortunes are for all. The Red Cross applies to every individual within our borders.